

# Portrait of My Uncle

By MAY SINCLAIR

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YES, it looks like a commission; that 's why I keep it stuck up there. But it is n't a commission; it 's a portrait of my uncle, Colonel Simpson—Simpson of Chitral.

No, he did n't. Does he look as if he 'd sit for anybody for five minutes? Does *it* look as if he 'd sat? You don't get portraiture like that out of sittings or out of any possible series of sittings, because, in the first place, you don't get the candor, the naïveté, the self-revelation. Of course I *might* have made an Academy thing of him, painted him in scarlet and crimson, with his decorations, or in khaki and a solar topi, if I 'd wanted Simpson of Chitral. But I did n't want him. Simpson of Chitral was only part of my uncle, and this—this is all my uncle.

Like the portraits of Strindberg, did you say? But he *was* like them. He *was* Strindberg. He had the same scored and crumpled face, the same twisted, tormented eyebrows, the same irritable, irascible scowl and glare. He had every bit of Strindberg's face except its genius and its great, square, bulging forehead. My uncle's forehead was rather like a lion's or a tiger's, straight and a little receding. But the torment 's the thing, and the torment 's there.

He was worth painting as an instance of conjugal fidelity carried to excess, carried beyond the bounds of reason. This is a composite portrait: it 's my uncle *and* my aunt. You could n't separate their two faces. They could n't separate them themselves. It was not simply that they 'd lived so long together that they grew like each other; it was because they behaved like each other to each other. They said the same things to each other, they irritated each other, they tore at each other's nerves, the *same* nerves, in the same way. They devastated each other's faces with the same remarkable results.

I 've no clear recollection of my uncle's face before my aunt got to work on it, but there 's a family tradition of Uncle Roly as a pink and chubby subaltern, and his regimental nickname was "The Cherub." He must have been home on his first leave somewhere in the later eighties. I remember him because of the model steam-engine he gave me. He always gave you interesting and expensive presents, and I never knew him tip you less than a sovereign. He was chubby even then, and absolutely uncrumpled, so it could n't have been India altogether. I think he 'd been engaged to her for ages, for he married her as soon as he got his captaincy, and took her out with him.

Then for a time we lost track of him. India seems to have swallowed them up. They were two years in a lonely up-country station in Bengal where the heat was awful. The other men had left their wives up in the hills or sent them home, so he never saw any European women except my aunt. Fancy that through the hot season and for two blessed years! Their first child was born there.

The heat seems to have had no effect whatever on my aunt. She was out five—six years. She simply would n't come home, and he—that 's the odd thing—did n't want her to. I 've told you conjugal fidelity was a perfect vice with him. It was *her* vice, too. After Bengal it was Bombay—Poona—and another baby. She was told they 'd lose both their children if they did n't send them home, and she shilly-shallied. She did n't want to send them with strangers, and she did n't want to go with them herself. Her place, she said, was at her husband's side. She shilly-shallied into another hot season, and the children died. That, you see, was where the vice came in.

It was n't till the death of the babies that they began to feel the devilishness of

the climate. Then it went suddenly for my uncle's liver, while my aunt was down with dysentery. I got all this from old Lumby, who was my uncle's subaltern. He says she must have taken to nagging him long before, perhaps in their honeymoon, to be so expert at it, but that it was n't till my uncle's nerves gave way that he nagged back. You gathered that she was fairly decent in public, but what goes on in a bungalow leaks out sooner or later into cantonments. Then came Chitral. Lumby says he does n't know what would have happened to my uncle if it had n't come. It saved him.

As long as there was trouble on the frontier he was all right. He would have sent her home *then*, but she would n't go. She said if there was to be fighting, her place was more than ever at his side, or within reasonable distance of his side. Their one chance was to separate, and they would n't take it. And when it was all over and he was Simpson of Chitral, she nagged him out of the service. He might have been anything after Chitral, but my aunt insisted on his retiring. She would n't leave him another year in India alone, and another year would have killed her. As it was, he thought she was dying, and he flung up his career and brought her back to England.

They used to come up to London for the season, and when it was over, he went to Harrogate to recover from it, and on to Scotland for the shooting, staying in people's houses. They were glad to have him; after all, he was Simpson of Chitral, and just at first he really had some social success. But not for long, because wherever he went, my aunt went with him. He would n't have gone without her; that would have been against his ideas of faithfulness and common decency. I can see him lugging her about with him on all his visits and nagging at her as he did it. They 'd quarrel about any mortal thing, the cab-fares and the trains and the hours of their arrival and departure and the time it took to catch them and about the porters' tips. Lumby said they were simply awful to travel with.

And then people got shy of asking them. He could have got on all right by himself,—to his friends he was always "good old Roly," and to outsiders he was Simpson of Chitral,—but wherever they went *she* was only Mrs. Simpson, the woman who had nagged him out of the service and wrecked a brilliant career. Other women did n't care about her, and when he had rubbed it into them that they could n't have him without her, they were n't so particularly keen on *him*. He was shelved, anyhow, when he left the service. Besides, people used to hear them quarreling in their bedroom.

So gradually they dropped out of things. I don't think either of them minded. She was afraid of society—of what he might do if he fairly got into it; and he, poor beggar, may have been afraid of himself.

And yet, no, I don't think he really *was* afraid. Fidelity seems to have come easy to him, and the changes in my aunt's face were so gradual it 's quite possible he did n't notice them.

They left London and went to live in Cheltenham and then in Bath. They nagged each other out of all these places in succession. And then they nagged each other into taking a rather large house at Tunbridge Wells. My people made me go and stay with them there. The old boy had a sort of sneaking affection for me because they 'd called me after him.

I found them quarreling in the kitchen garden. He wanted strawberry beds and, I think, asparagus, and she wanted a herbaceous border, with delphiniums in it. I remember her saying to me: "Your uncle does n't care about anything he can't eat. If he could eat delphiniums, he 'd plant them fast enough." And *he* said she 'd got the whole place to grow her delphiniums in, and he would n't have 'em in his kitchen garden.

I can see it all, I can feel the hot sun baking the beds, I can smell the hot peaches ripening, I can hear my uncle's voice and my aunt's voice rising in a crescendo of irritation; I can see their poor



middle-aged faces twitching and getting more and more heated, and the little twists and lines of annoyance and resentment showing through the heat like a pattern. They must have been going at it hammer and tongs before I arrived, for my uncle was looking quite tired and crumpled then. And they kept it up a long time after, for I remember the garden was cool again before they 'd done.

They quarreled all the time I stayed with them. They quarreled about whether I had enough to eat or not and about what room I was to have and about the time I was to be called in the morning and about the places I was to be taken to see. In the evenings we went to the Pantiles to hear the band play, and they quarreled about whether we were to sit or to walk up and down. Every evening except Sunday they went to the Pantiles to hear the band play, and every evening they quarreled about whether they should sit or walk up and down. On Sunday they seemed to call a truce; anyhow, they agreed that I was to go to church, which was the one thing I did n't want to do. But when it was all over, after evening service, they quarreled worse than ever because of the restraint they 'd put on themselves all day.

The odd thing was that they were neither of them naturally cantankerous, and they never quarreled or even disagreed with other people. It was marvelous to watch the automatic rapidity with which my aunt's face untied itself to expand to you, and my uncle could be positively suave. The phenomenon of irritability seemed to be related solely to the tie that bound them. It increased with the tightening of the tie.

Finally they nagged each other out of the house at Tunbridge Wells and into a flat in Talbot Road, Bayswater.

It was about this time that my aunt's cousin and trustee mislaid my uncle's private income. She had nagged him into the arrangements that had made it possible. And odder still, now that he really had a grievance, he never uttered a single word of reproach or even of annoyance.

He simply sold the Tunbridge Wells house, cut down expenses, and declined on Bayswater and his pension. The cousin could n't touch the house and furniture or the pension. And that 's how I came to know him—really know him.

Lumby used to go to see them fairly often; but I 'm afraid I did n't, at least not so often as I might have done. It was brutal of me, because I 'd every reason to believe that their only happy moments were when either Lumby or I was with them. Their lives could n't have been worth living when they were shut up alone together in that awful little flat. They were desperate—I mean spiritually desperate—now, and you felt that they snatched at you as they 'd have snatched at any straw; and I was afraid, mortally afraid, of being sucked under. Still, I went. I was interested in their faces.

The first time, I remember, they made me stay to dinner, and my uncle flew into a passion because the servant had n't put any chillies or any green gherkins into the curry. He said my aunt ought never to have engaged her; she might have seen by the woman's face that she could n't make a curry. My aunt said he 'd better go into the kitchen and make it himself, if he was so particular; and he said he 'd be driven to it, and that the cat could make a better curry. They were always quarreling about curry, and yet my uncle *would* have it. That 's nothing in itself; I 've never seen the Anglo-Indian yet that was n't sensitive about curry. Still, I sometimes think he had it on purpose. As for the servant, I 'm quite sure my aunt engaged her as an *agent provocateur*.

Then—I don't know which of them began it—they took to playing chess in the evenings to wile away the frightful hours, and that was horrible. You 'd come upon them there, in the little stuffy, shabby sitting-room, cramped together over the chess-board, my aunt's hand, poised with her pawn, hovering, shifting, and hovering again, and her poor old head shaking in a perfect palsy of indecision, while my uncle, horribly close, sat and glared at her in torment and in hatred till he could n't

bear it any longer, and he 'd shout at her: "Put that pawn down, for God's sake! You—you—" He was always trembling on the verge of some terrific epithet that he could never bring himself actually to use. "Your bishop can take my queen in two moves. Do you think I 'm going to sit up all night?"

And they quarreled everlastingly about the flat. My aunt had chosen Bayswater, and he was responsible for the flat itself, it being the only one he could afford. *He* would call upon Heaven to explain to him why she had brought him to that God-forsaken place. *She* would declare that nobody but an inhabitant of Bedlam would have expected her to live in a miserable hole like that, where there was n't room to turn round. And he would roar, "Who *wants* to turn round?" and point out that my aunt was not a whirling dervish and that there 'd be room enough in the flat if she did n't fill it with the sound of her voice.

There was no refuge for him there,—he could n't escape on to another floor,—so he used to take sanctuary in my studio. He called it taking a constitutional. It was after I 'd moved up from the Vale into Edwardes Square, and he 'd walk all the way from Bayswater across Kensington Gardens. I think his ingenuity was pretty severely taxed in concealing these visits from my aunt; all his genuine excuses—his important appointments, his club, his tailor—had gone from him with his income. In these later years I can see him wearing with a great air of distinction the same shabby suit all the time. He 'd come in and collapse on the divan and talk to me. He seemed to find relief in this communion. I 've known him pour out his soul—all that was left of it. The revelations were stupendous.

Not, mind you, that he ever said a word against my aunt. He never mentioned her except to say that she would wonder where he was and that he must be getting back to her. He simply sat there, saying what a fool he 'd been and what a mess he 'd made of his life and how he wished to God—he was always wishing to God—

he 'd never left the service. That, he said, was where he 'd made his grand mistake. But you saw—however much he wrapped it up you saw—that they 'd come, both of them, to the end of their tether. Their only chance was for one of them to die. It was as if he knew it.

After a while they gave up playing chess. They were getting older and they could n't stand the nervous strain of it. They took to playing patience, by themselves, in separate corners. Even that was n't very successful, because in that room, wherever they sat, they were always opposite each other, and if either of them moved or sneezed or anything, it put the other out.

But it did n't last long. I strolled in one evening and found my uncle doing nothing, just sitting in his place opposite my aunt and shading his eyes with one hand. He said the light bothered him.

I asked him why he was n't playing patience, and he let out in a whisper, so that my aunt should n't hear him, that he could n't see the cards. His eyes were bothering him. He was worried about his eyes.

But he would n't go to see an oculist. He 'd always hated doctors, and he owned to a fear, a positive craven fear, of oculists. I suppose he was afraid of what they might tell him. Then suddenly one day his sight went altogether. He could n't see a thing, not even large objects like the sideboard or my aunt. I took him then in a taxi to an oculist, to several oculists.

They all said the same thing. It was quite clear that my uncle could n't see; and yet, on examination, they could find nothing the matter with his eyes. The optic nerve, the whole apparatus of seeing, was intact. There was no reason why he should n't see except that he did n't. And they could n't cure him. The fault, we could only suppose, was in my uncle's brain. There he was, stone-blind, poor devil, and none of them could cure him. But I dare n't take him to an alienist; he 'd never have consented to *that*. Then Lumby got hold of him.



What comes next, the really remarkable part, was told me by Peters—Peters, the man who used to run that place that Lumby was secretary of, the Home for Nervous Diseases, in Gordon Square. Lumby sent us to Peters.

Peters had set up as a psychotherapist. He 'd studied in Vienna and Berlin and all sorts of places, and he went in strong for what he called psychoanalysis.

Peters started to experiment on my poor old uncle's psyche. He was awfully excited about what we 'd told him. He said he 'd try psychoanalyzing him first, using the word-association test, so as to get, he said, at his "complexes." But he told us *that* was n't a bit of good. He could n't get the old gentleman to "collaborate." He would n't play the game. It 's a sort of game, you know; the other chap reels off whole lists of words, and you answer each one, slick, with the first thing that comes into your head. He says "Knife!" and you say "Fork!" or ought to, if there 's nothing the matter with you. If you hesitate you 're lost. Peters says he fired off two hundred words at my uncle, and he would n't answer any one of them. Simply would n't. He was so desperately afraid of giving himself away. He simply sat there dumb, staring at Peters and not seeing him—with a perfect picture of Peters engraved on his retina all the time—and blinking.

So Peters *had* to hypnotize him. He put him on a couch in an empty room with a dark-blue light in it. He says he got him off most beautifully. And when he was once off he answered all the test-words like a lamb. Peters seems to have known by instinct what would draw him, for presently he tried him with "Face." He asked my uncle what that word suggested to him, and my uncle said:

"Take it away! Take it away! I don't want to see it again. Take it away!"

Peters said:

"Whose face is it? Your father's face or your mother's face or your wife's face?"

And my uncle said:

"Wife's face. Take it away!"

Peters explained it all scientifically on

some theory of the subconscious. It seems that Freud or Jung or Morton Prince or one of those Johnnies had a case exactly like my uncle's. He said my uncle could n't see and did n't see because he did n't *want* to see. His blindness was the expression of a strong subconscious wish never to see his wife again—a wish which, of course, his conscious self had very properly suppressed. On the one side it was a laudable effort at self-preservation on the part of my uncle's psyche. On the other side, of course, it was just a morbid obsession and could be easily removed.

He removed it. Doctors do these things.

I ought to tell you that about the time of my uncle's blindness, that blessed illusion which Peters deprived him of, my aunt had a series of remarkable dreams. She kept on dreaming that she saw my uncle lying dead, laid out on the big double bed in the little room they slept in. "Laid out, Roly, not properly, but sometimes in his uniform, and sometimes in evening dress, as they do on the Continent. A most distressing dream, Roly."

There was no doubt about the distress. Each time she woke herself with crying.

She told these dreams to Lumby, and Lumby told them to Peters, and Peters said my aunt's dreams were the same thing as my uncle's blindness, the disguised expression of her subconscious wish that, as Peters put it, he "was n't there." And when Lumby said, "But the distress, Peters, the distress!" Peters said that was where the disguise came in. My aunt's psyche was n't going to let on, if it could help it, what was the matter with her, and when the subconscious let the cat out of the bag it covered it up. There was no end to the little hypocrisies of the psyche.

Lumby said he thought this was awfully far-fetched of Peters, and he told him so. Then Peters said that if you fetched it far *enough* you could trace the whole business back to unhappy love-affairs of my aunt and uncle when they were two years old. He wished he could get hold of them both to psychoanalyze

them. He 'd *like* to have another try at my uncle.

I said I thought Peters had done quite enough mischief as it was. He 'd be stopping my aunt's dreams next. Her dreams were probably a comfort to her, poor soul.

Lumby was sincerely attached to my uncle, and he confided to me that he did n't like those dreams. He said he was n't superstitious, but they made him uneasy. Quite evidently he 'd got it into his head that they were premonitory of my uncle's death.

So that neither Lumby nor I was prepared for the letter we got from him a day or two after, telling us that my aunt had had a severe stroke, nor for the wire that followed it, announcing her death. Somehow it had never occurred to any of us that my aunt could die.

My uncle wrote to thank me for the wreath I sent him. I noticed that his letter was rather remarkably free from pious and conventional expressions of bereavement. My mother, I know, was a little shocked by it. She said it sounded callous. The flowers might have been sent for the dinner-table; there was hardly any reference to his loss. She was even more shocked when I told her I respected my uncle's honesty.

It did n't prevent him from turning an awfully queer color at the funeral. But he bore up well. Better, Lumby said, than he had expected. He shook hands with us when it was all over, looking us straight in the face almost defiantly,—he looked like Simpson of Chitral,—then he squared his shoulders and walked out of the churchyard briskly—*too* briskly, my mother said.

I did n't see him for about five weeks after. He was not at home the three times that I called. Then one evening he turned up at my studio. He looked

sprucer and younger than he 'd done for long enough. That might have been the effect of his black suit, the first new one he 'd had for years. Also of his slenderness. He had thinned considerably, and it improved him. His face was dragged a little with this shrinkage, but it was no longer tortured. I could have sworn that at last he realized that he was free.

He collapsed on the divan there just as he used to do when he 'd found sanctuary. For a long time he said nothing. He told me to go on painting and take no notice of him. And then after a bit he began to talk to me.

He said he had n't been able to come and see me before. To tell the truth, he had n't felt up to it. He had n't felt up to anything lately. Somehow he 'd lost his grip of things—lost all care and interest.

I asked him,—God forgive me!—what was wrong with him. And he said one thing was n't more wrong than another. It was just a general break-up of the whole machine. He did n't think he could hold out much longer. He was done for.

I said all the encouraging things I could think of. It seemed to me that he was simply suffering from the shock of a too sudden liberation. He could n't realize his blessedness. Of course I did n't tell him so, but I did tell him that sixty was no sort of age to crumple up at, and that with the family constitution he had a long life still to look forward to.

He looked at me gravely.

"If I thought *that*," he said, "I 'd—blow—my—brains out." He looked up at me again—another look. "The fact is, Roly, I can't get over your aunt's death."

He did n't get over it. He died on the same day of the month exactly one year after.

